

Asbestos victims want company held accountable

By SUSAN GALLAGHER
Associated Press Writer

LIBBY — They're getting ready for the Asbestos Health Fair in this old mining town.

Posters promise "Door Prizes!" and "Blood draw to participate in ongoing research!" Companies that sell home oxygen supplies will send reps. Doctors and researchers will be here.

There will be consultants to help asbestosis victims apply for public aid. And

there will be advice on finding help with the housework when the disease becomes too much.

To visitors to the town of some 8,000 people, it all must seem surreal. To the locals, this has, sadly, become part of life in Libby.

Asbestos released into the air from the now-closed W.R. Grace and Co. vermiculite mine just down the road is blamed by some health authorities for killing some 200 people and sickening one of every eight

residents. Last week, a federal grand jury indicted the company and seven executives, accusing them of conspiring for decades to hide the danger. Grace has denied any criminal wrongdoing and said it looks forward to "setting the record straight" in court.

For many in town, the indictments mean those responsible will finally be held accountable.

"One person anywhere along the line could have

said enough is enough, and they didn't," said Gayla Benefield, who lost her parents to asbestos diseases. Her father worked in the mine. She believes her mother became sick from the dust her father brought home on his clothes.

Grace employees "knew the dust would get them," she said. "But no one knew their wife would die the same way."

"I'd like to tell you I feel

See VICTIMS, 7A



AP PHOTO
Gayla Benefield, who lost both parents to asbestos-related diseases, visits with asbestosis victim Les Skramstad on Thursday at Skramstad's home in Libby.

SDMS Document ID

2031646

GREAT FALLS
TRIBUNE

Great Falls MT 59904

Daily

FEB 16 2005

Superior Clipping Service

Glendive MT 406-377-6612

Victims: Some defend corporation in Libby

FROM 1A

sorry" for the men indicted, added Les Skramstad, who worked at the mine for 2½ years. "But so help me, I can't, because I don't think they feel sorry for us."

Now 68, Skramstad is among those sickened by asbestos and said he has been given less than two years to live. His wife and two of his grown children also have respiratory disease, which the family blames on the dust Skramstad brought home.

News reports six years ago brought to light a link between the vermiculite mine, which closed in 1990, and the health problems among townspeople.

Vermiculite ore from the Libby mine was used in a number of household products, including a popular type of insulation. Grace also made the vermiculite available around Libby for use as mulch in home gardens and a running surface on school tracks.

But the ore contained naturally occurring tremolite asbestos, an especially dangerous form of the mineral. The long, needle-like asbestos fibers can easily become embedded in the lungs and cause such illnesses as asbestosis, which is often fatal, and mesothelioma, a rare, fast-moving cancer that attacks the lining of the lungs.

In the past few years, the town and the mine have been declared a Superfund site, and the Environmental Protection Agency has spent some \$55 million on the cleanup. Residents have undergone health screenings, and more are under way. The Asbestos Health Fair begins March 5; this is the second year in a row it has

been held.

Despite the allegations, the company has its defenders in town.

"To come out and say that these guys are basically responsible for crimes that hid things, that hurt the people of Libby, is baloney," said Ed Baker, a former city councilman whose father died from asbestos-related disease in 1983 after working at the mine for 30 years.

"He'd go back to work for them today if he was alive. My dad knew in the '60s that his lungs were turning to concrete. Like he always told me, he took his chances and he could have quit at anytime. But they were good jobs."

Baker's downtown clothing store, Ed's Threads, stands near Epperson Mountaineering, which has begun making a backpack-style carrier for oxygen tanks used by people who need help breathing because asbestos scarred their lungs.

Also downtown is the EPA's office. The agency's cleanup has turned into an economic engine for Libby, a community hungry for high-paying jobs to replace those lost with the closing of the mine in 1990 and a sawmill two years ago.

Mike Noble, who lost his father to asbestosis and has lung damage himself, welcomed the indictment, saying, "Corporate America needs to stand up and be held accountable for the decisions it makes." But he added: "I don't feel we want to put W.R. Grace out of business. I want them to stay in business so they can pay. And where's the justice in putting thousands of people out of work?"